

Profile of Dr. Maria Sanchez

By: Debra Wood, RN

A young Latina physician born and raised in Pasadena, determined to reduce chronic disease by promoting healthy behavior, has set up practice in one of the largest federally qualified health centers in the United States. I want to serve my community,” said Maria Teresa Sanchez, MD, a family medicine physician at AltaMed in Pasadena, California. “I have a big interest in prevention.”

Maria came from humble beginnings. Her mother grew up in the projects in East Los Angeles and her grandparents often picked fruit in Central California. “It was that community I felt drawn to helping,” she said. Dr. Sanchez obtained a master’s degree in Mental Health from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore.

She found much of prevention not in teaching healthy behaviors but was research based. For instance she studied how Hispanic mothers were not feeding their children properly but we're not taught healthier ways. “I gathered data but was not allowed to provide education,” Sanchez said.

Becoming a family medicine physician

Sanchez missed working with people, improving individuals’ lives and decided to become a physician in primary care. She completed prerequisites at Hopkins and began medical school at the University of Illinois in Chicago, where she met her husband.

While Chicago will always hold a special place in her heart, she yearned to return to Southern California and be closer to her parents. Sanchez completed her residency in family medicine at Adventist Health Glendale, just north of Los Angeles.

“I knew a residency in a place I wanted to settle would help me become familiar with and develop relationships with specialists,” she said. Sanchez decided to become a family medicine physician, because she wanted to practice in an outpatient setting and take care of people across the lifespan, from children to older adults. “I wanted to provide healthcare to people with limited access,” she said.

Joining AltaMed

With a plethora of available physician jobs in Los Angeles, Sanchez investigated different settings and talked with friends about possible work placements. One of them mentioned AltaMed. When Sanchez checked it out, she found a location about five minutes from where she lives.

“It was amazing,” she said. “It was the only place I applied to, because I heard good things, and it was close to home. I liked the motto of ‘treating every patient like family.’” AltaMed began as the East LA Barrio Free Clinic more than five decades ago. Today, it serves more than 300,000 patients in the metropolitan Los Angeles area annually. A large percentage of the organization’s patients are Hispanic. AltaMed physicians take responsibility for their patients and lead a team of health professionals.

Sanchez speaks Spanish and can communicate with patients in their native language. She also understands the culture. Later on, Sanchez found out that her grandmother and aunt on her father’s side were involved in founding the East LA Barrio Free Clinic. “For me, everything aligned,” she said.

Unfamiliar with the hiring and interviewing process, Sanchez had started working with Lance Boerner, a recruiter at Merritt Hawkins. He helped her with the application; explained retirement packages and benefits, including student loan forgiveness; and coordinated interviews for her.

“It was awesome working with him,” Sanchez recalled. “This was my first real job, and I really did not understand a lot of the process. He was so patient with me and always available to me. He made me feel I had someone on my side. He had my back the whole way and made the process super easy.”

Sanchez was the first in her residency class to secure a job, but not just any job, one she enjoys and lets her practice medicine in a rewarding fashion. She works four 10-hour days, giving her a three-day weekend, and has recruited colleagues to work at AltaMed, even with all of the available physician jobs in Los Angeles.

“Mine is a dream job,” she said. “I am so happy where I am working and what I am doing.” Many of Sanchez patients have never seen a physician before or at least not one in the United States. As an AltaMed physician, she talks with her patients about diet, stress management, activity levels and social determinants of health. She can refer to the organization’s nutritionists or diabetes prevention and management programs. Having enough time with each patient sometimes presents challenges, but she makes it work.

“I am motivated by interactions with patients,” Sanchez said. “This is a population that needs physicians who are dedicated to prevention and helping the vulnerable and less served, [who are facing] a lot more health disparities.”